

*polyALTERITY* Joseph Nechvatal

by Sarah Maline

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Joseph Nechvatal, *Cycling Reproduction* (1991) in 2000 *polyALTERITY* exhibition, Farmington Maine

The extravagant, seductive surfaces of Nechvatal's computer-robotic assisted paintings are formed of infection and inflection, delirium and decay. The artist unleashes computer viruses on digital bodies and/or body parts: the, in his words, "body-in-bits". Robotics then executes the paintings from the contaminated files.

The diffraction of the pixelated body in these paintings – both as sexualized representation and as body of coded information, and the dispersal of its vestigial meanings through the actions of the viral agent – complete the

process of sublime disincarnation begun when the body first became sign; initially analog, then digitally encoded. While these paintings at one level address alterity in the apparently oppositional relationship between biology and technology, their fluidity and slippage of meaning subvert the informational aura of the digitized realm.

Like his earlier computer-robotic assisted paintings of the mid-1980's, Nechvatal's current work (2000) creates immersive saturated spaces dominated by pattern. Fragments of soft human form are more clearly visible now, emerging from patterns of coded overlay. There are glowing Barnett Newmanesque zips in several works here (for Newman these signified genesis) and in their relative coherence the lines provide a sharp, vigorous opposition to the deterioration of the virtual body through viral infection (and by extension to the death of the real body through sexually transmitted disease).

The effect of these paintings is rhapsodic and ecstatic in the dizzying passages from the real to the virtual; from the fullness of meaning to its emptiness.